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Teacher Understanding of Student Understanding: Revising the Gap between Teacher Conceptions and Students' Ways with Literature

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This article examines three English teachers' conceptions of their students' literary understandings. I focus on the teachers' conceptualizations of the act of reading in relation to literary understanding and how they responded to videotape artifacts of their students reading literature. The teachers were hopeful about the possibilities literature afforded their students, but each expressed difficulty managing students' reading problems in relation to teaching literature. The study explores how the three case-study teachers framed reading *in generalized terms separated from the concerns of literature as a discipline, and how the teachers' own experienced ways of reading literature played a role in directing attention away from learner competencies and toward the content concerns of a literature classroom.*

Introduction

Each day, Andrew, Ellen, and Caroline, members of the same English department, work carefully with scores of students—organizing lessons, reading together, developing projects, discussing, observing, and assessing student work. Each brings a love of literature to the classroom, is a skilled reader of texts, and is committed to enriching students' transactions with literature. However, for all three teachers, understanding student thinking about literature can be frustrating work. In separate interviews, asked about how students respond to literature, each teacher pauses thoughtfully. "If they're assigned to read it," Andrew, a veteran teacher, says of a typical classroom text, "I think it works in a different way [from when I read]. They would read through it . . . and do it as an *assignment.*" Ellen, a second-year teacher, smiles and shakes her head.

> They could read—they could read anything, but they could get to the bottom of the page and they have no idea what they just read . . . They could go through a whole piece with 50 words in it that they didn't know and not think twice about getting to the end, waiting for someone to tell them what it meant.

Caroline, a department co-chair, wonders what students sometimes mean when they write about literature. Looking at a student paper, she says:

> What's she thinking? Is she just saying that? I can't tell. I have trouble reading her mind there. And maybe I shouldn't try to read kids' minds because *who knows* what they're thinking.

A mix of exasperation, humor, and insight pervades these comments, comments that reflect both unique proximity to student thinking and the sheer elusiveness of the task of understanding such thinking in school settings. Determining how students think, what they bring to texts, why they enjoy or resist a reading—each of these represents the complicated work of knowing how and what students learn in a literature classroom. For Andrew, Ellen, and Caroline, experience in classrooms, their day-to-day work with students, has not made such understanding easy to identify, to support, or to draw upon for teaching.

Mathematics educators have wrestled with this problem for over a decade. Studies in math education have suggested that teacher understanding of student thinking within a subject area is crucial for student learning (Carpenter, Fennema, Peterson, & Carey, 1988; Fennema, Franke, Carpenter, & Carey, 1993; Franke, Carpenter, Fennema, Ansell, & Behrend, 1998; Peterson, Fennema, & Carpenter, 1991). According to this research, student learning in schools relies heavily on a particular kind of teacher knowledge—specifically a teacher's ability to conceptualize student thinking productively, to recognize the incipient strategies, approaches, and pre-conceptions students may bring to disciplinary tasks and contexts, and to develop instruction accordingly.

Such understanding by teachers of student understanding, however, has received scant attention in the English education community. While the research base around students' approaches to literature and writing, within and beyond school settings, has grown, studies of how *teachers* conceptualize student understanding have been rare. This study provides an account. Through analysis of qualitative case studies, I examine the ways in which three English teachers understand their students' responses to literature. Two particular issues are the focus of this paper: (a) how English teachers conceptualize the act of reading in relation to literary understanding; and (b) how artifacts of students' literature reading, specifically, videotaped think-alouds of students as they read literature, might support teachers' understanding of student understanding.

Conceptual Framework

Understanding Understanding

The elusive nature of understanding student understanding reflects a complex philosophical and interpretive problem: What does it mean to understand

understanding—that is, a student's understanding of literature, or a teacher's understanding of students—when one's own understanding is implicated in the process? How can teachers understand student response, or researchers understand teacher understanding of such response, in light of the multiple perspectives teachers and students bring and in light of researchers' own limited frames of reference? For Gadamer (1996), 20th century social science has generally drawn upon norms of scientific rationality to resolve such questions. This tradition constructs objectivity through systematic skepticism and controlled experimentation, methods that attempt to reduce or eliminate prejudice and false assumption in the observer. Many researchers in reading education, for example, design studies to learn about what really happens when students read and then report the results to teachers, who are then expected to correct their biases in relation to the new knowledge.

For Gadamer, however, understanding is not about eliminating prejudice. Our biases are not something we overcome. In Gadamer's words, "the prejudices of the individual, far more than his judgments, constitute the historical reality of his being" (pp. 276-277). Human knowing and understanding are radically bound to finite points of view, or horizons, and knowledge exists always within a hermeneutic circle, that is, a circle of interpretation rather than objectivity. Our constant task in relation to any other, for Gadamer, is to bring forward or highlight our own prejudices, to recognize how such fore-conceptions shape our knowing, and to allow them to be challenged and revised by the other. In the event of understanding, then, prejudices are not reduced or eliminated but are given a place within a larger horizon. In Gadamer's words: "Working out [one's] fore-projection, which is constantly revised in terms of what emerges as [one] penetrates into the meaning, is understanding what is there" (p. 267). That is, objectivity only occurs as we realize that our own prejudices, which persist, are inadequate, that something *else* is there, something not constructed by us. Gadamer sees in this event a "fusion of horizons" (p. 306). Understanding does not emerge from within one pure horizon or from simply espousing the perspective of the expert. Rather, understanding is generated in the in-between spaces where horizons meet, where other-ness is recognized, and where prejudices are revised.

From a teacher's point of view, understanding student understanding cannot be conceived as perceiving student thinking in itself, as if we could gaze upon it directly, *or* as adopting the expert's conception of student response. Again, for Gadamer, understanding never occurs this way. All understanding of students necessarily presupposes a teacher's own biases. Rather than objectifying student understanding as a thing in itself, in particular as something researchers alone can identify, Gadamer would highlight and encourage the interplay between teacher, student, and researcher perspectives. Studying teacher understanding of student understanding, then, the primary work of this study, is less a matter of objectify-

ing or testing teachers' partial knowledge in relation to a research base on student understanding, although attention to research can be both useful and powerful. To understand understanding involves, instead, richer interaction with teachers' starting points in thinking about students, and attention to ways in which teachers can identify their own horizons in relation to other possible horizons.

In addition, understanding student understanding implies concrete circumstances, that is, particular teacher perspectives in relation to particular students and texts. Knowledge of student understanding cannot occur in terms of typical students, generically understood. Instead, such knowledge is always integrated with situated contexts and circumstances. Legal interpretation, Gadamer argues, provides one appropriate model for this kind of grounded learning. The meaning of law, for example, never exists in the abstract but is discovered precisely in its practical application to a specific case. Similarly, it is in the application of teacher thinking to particular cases and contexts of student thinking that understanding of teacher and student thinking arises.

Reading and Literary Understanding

An ongoing tradition in English education argues for a close integration of reading and disciplinary thinking (Applebee, 1978, Applebee, 1996; Earthman, 1992; Langer, 1995; Purves & Rippere, 1968; Rabinowitz, 1987; Rosenblatt, 1938/1976, 1978; Scholes, 1985, 1998; Thomson, 1987; Wilhelm, 1997). Within this tradition, disciplinary knowledge is represented in terms of processes rather than products. Literature study, in other words, best involves apprenticing students to *ways* of interacting with texts, rather than to the already-finished conclusions of adult discourse. Practitioners are encouraged to turn toward the act of reading itself and to identify and scaffold for students textual strategies and processes central to literary engagement and thinking (Scholes, 1985), whether such processes focus on evoking experience (Langer, 1995; Rosenblatt, 1938, 1978; Wilhelm, 1997; Wilhelm, Edmiston, & Beane, 1998) or on responding to the distinct characteristics of literary discourses (Hamel & Smith, 1998; Rabinowitz,1987; Rabinowitz & Smith, 1998; Smith, 1989).

Indeed, expert/novice studies show that knowing generic reading strategies alone may be of limited value for teachers, as readers encounter nuanced disciplinary tasks. For example, Peskin (1998) found that mature readers of poetry focus on wordplay and structure as cues for their response, rather than trying to comprehend the plain sense of a passage (example of mature reader comment): "This sounds like a riddle. It sounds like a nursery rhyme. It's a passage which is more pleased with . . . creating a mystery than it is with making itself clearly understood" (p. 251). Novice readers, on the other hand, typically draw on very general reading strategies, such as re-reading, when passages are hard to follow. Earthman (1992) provides a similar analysis from a reader-response perspective,

focusing on the distinct ways experienced readers fill gaps in literary texts. Such perspectives argue for careful attention to students' ways of reading as they are constituted within disciplinary domains and a challenge to what Wineburg (2001) calls "disciplinary homogenization" when it comes to supporting student thinking. "Although we carve the school day into separate periods," Wineburg writes, "hoping thereby to teach students to be multi-lingual in various ways of knowing, we too often end up teaching a single tongue" (p. 79). The single tongue, in this case, is generalized thinking strategies, comprehension skills, or study skills for approaching academic dilemmas that may require nuanced disciplinary ways of knowing.

Despite arguments like Wineburg's, we know little about how teachers in fact conceive of the interconnection between reading and disciplinary understanding. Secondary teachers, presumably, develop informal conceptions of this relationship based on experience, listening to students read aloud, school context, conceptions of subject matter, and on assumed notions of literacy (cf. Gee, 1996). Content area reading courses, workshops, and research, which acquaint teachers with reading theory and strategies within and across disciplines, are common (Alvermann & Phelps, 2002; Dornan, Matz Rosen, & Wilson, 1997; Pearson, Roehler, Dole, & Duffy, 1992; Vacca & Vacca, 2002), but their effect and relevance for secondary teachers remain an open question. The increasing attention to reading at the secondary level overall suggests that teachers' awareness of the reading demands students experience is growing. But we know little about how teachers frame this student experience in relation to their own subject-matter expertise and teaching practice.

Learning about Student Understanding: Artifact and Experience

How might English teachers come to learn about their students' ways of reading literature, or put differently, about their students as readers of literature? Recent research in teacher learning, in a broad sense, focuses on the importance of using classroom artifacts of student thinking for this purpose, such as journals, drawings, or tapes of student talk. Transforming teacher thinking, the argument goes, requires attention to diverse samples of student work, grounding teacher learning in particular instances and contexts for thinking. Examining student talk, writing, and artwork, in this sense, can focus teachers on the nuances of student thinking and cultivate pedagogical content knowledge (Shulman, 1986, 1987), the transformation of teachers' content-oriented understandings "into the minds and motivations of learners" (Shulman, 1987, p. 16).

Understood by many as decisive for teacher development, dimensions of pedagogical content knowledge have been categorized to include knowledge of curriculum, tools, and strategies for instruction, beliefs about purposes for teaching a discipline, and knowledge of student understandings (Grossman, 1990). The latter

category may have special relevance, however, in shaping teachers' beliefs toward other categories. Attention to learning artifacts may help teachers perceive unforeseen strengths that students bring to classrooms, informal strategies they use to solve textual problems, and common misconceptions or difficulties they face with texts; such insights can in turn shape how teachers view the curriculum and instructional decision-making in classrooms. Ball and Cohen (1999) thus challenge the culture of professional development in teaching by insisting that documents of practice and artifacts of student thinking be the source and touchstone for all teacher learning.

Examples of generative teacher learning with artifacts have been most noticeable in mathematics education (Brinker, 1998; Carpenter, Fennema, & Franke, 1996; Carpenter, et al., 1988; Franke, et al., 1998; Fennema, et al., 1993; Hiebert, Carpenter, Fennema, Fuson, Human, Murray, Olivier, & Wearne, 1995; Peterson, et al., 1991). Yet, work of this kind in the area of literature education remains rare (Grossman, 2001; Hamel, 2000). The need for such research is suggested by Rabinowitz (1998), who has explored distinctions between students' first readings of literature and what he calls "reading against memory." Reading against memory represents what teachers do to plan for instruction after having read a text multiple times. Reading for class, in his words, amounts typically to "re-reading" for teachers, or reading in light of one's already-developed expectations, beliefs, and conclusions about a text. Rabinowitz argues that, while teachers surely attempt to imagine students' needs with texts, the conclusions of earlier readings inevitably become the landmarks that frame plans for teaching and expectations for student understanding.

Unfortunately, such landmarks are poor guides for understanding students. Remembered readings typically involve what Rabinowitz calls readings of "coherence" (p. 95), a reading that assumes or seeks the overall design of a work. First readings, on the other hand, are typically "configurational" (p. 94), that is, characterized by tentativeness and confusion for readers, a "perplexing walk" (p. 100) for readers. Rabinowitz writes:

> The initial act of reading inevitably involves expectations that aren't met, predictions that don't work out, details that are missed, patterns that aren't completed . . . That sense of dislocation . . . is among the *fundamental* experiences the first time through a text, especially a complex one. (p. 100)

For Rabinowitz, literature teachers generally do not distinguish their experienced reading practices from readings of configuration. They too often mean "reading against memory" when they speak of teaching reading, a problematic starting point for understanding student understanding.

In short, access to artifacts can be both productive and problematic for teacher learning. Access to student thinking may acquaint teachers with unfamiliar details

of student response, but the frames of reference teachers bring to learning artifacts may serve to confirm what teachers already know about texts and already assume about students. If experienced reading processes provide teachers with powerful resources for identifying and supporting students' readings (Shoenbach, Greenleaf, Cziko, & Hurwitz, 1999), we must continue to examine the nature of this resource and the ways in which teachers draw upon it to frame assumptions about student understanding.

Method

I followed a qualitative case study approach for this study. I wanted to examine my research questions through thick accounts of practitioner reflection. The power of the qualitative design is its rich description of the nuances and circumstances of particular cases, trading off a larger sample for more attention to the "ecological circumstances of action" (Lin & Erickson, 1986, p. 101), and to how knowledge might be represented from the actors' points of view. Using a small number of cases allows for a finer-grained look at teacher thinking and promotes theory-building around issues of understanding student understanding.

Setting

This study was completed with three volunteer teacher/participants from the same department in a mid-sized secondary school. Of the three high schools in its district, Shaw High School (a pseudonym) had the strongest academic reputation. The school had ranked nationally for its numbers of students who took Advanced Placement examinations. Shaw served a population it described as economically and culturally diverse, and students who attended came from a mix of rural, working class, military, and professional families. The ethnic composition of the school was mostly homogenous, primarily of Western European descent (72%), with smaller percentages of Asian (12%), African American (4%), Pacific Islander (5%), and Hispanic (4%) students. The English Department at Shaw offered a college-prep curriculum. All 10th grade students took a general sophomore English course, which revolved around gaining familiarity with various textual genres: short story, novel, poem/drama, and research. At the junior and senior levels, students took electives that focused on writing, literature, or communication. In addition, at the time of this study, the department had a class called Basic English, for sophomore students who had exhibited difficulty with reading and writing tasks in past schoolwork.

Participants

I identified secondary English teachers who were teaching literature currently or had taught literature recently. I looked within a single English department for reasons of convenience, a choice that allowed me to work with teachers who

experienced similar sorts of school and departmental pressures. I focused on three teachers to identify potential variations and, through cross-case comparison, sharpen and strengthen findings. The participants themselves represent a convenience sample of sorts, a collection of teachers who were willing and available. They were selected volunteers, individuals either recommended by an administrator on the basis of their high-quality teaching and/or approached separately by me. In the end, the three teachers selected, Andrew Bevington, Caroline Daly, and Ellen Frazier (all pseudonyms), represent a range of experience from 2 years to 26 years teaching English.

The participants in this study also included three students who completed think-aloud protocols for their teachers to examine, although the students themselves were not a direct focus of investigation. Each teacher and I agreed upon one student to complete a think-aloud. In selecting students, we considered students we thought might be interesting to learn about. For example, we discussed a student who was lethargic in class but always carried around his own independent novels; we discussed students who seemed very able but reserved; and we discussed a student who had struggled with English classes in the past but seemed to be doing better.

Data Collection

The study employed two primary data collection strategies: individual interviews and classroom observations. The interviews were most central to my findings. The purpose of observations was to corroborate, complicate, and clarify the conceptions of student thinking that emerged in the interviews, and to look for relationships between teacher conceptions of student thinking and classroom practice. In addition, I asked the teachers to complete a brief survey focusing on their subject-matter backgrounds and experience teaching literature. As part of the survey, teachers ranked their own content knowledge and their experience teaching literature on a Likert scale of 1 (low) to 6 (high).

I conducted four semi-structured interviews with each teacher. The first interview focused on background information as well as general beliefs and practices in teaching literature. In this interview, I also wanted to gain insight into teachers' general perceptions of students, and how they believe students approach and learn literature. The second interview focused on teachers' own thinking processes with literature. In this interview, I asked each teacher to read and think aloud[1] about two different texts, a text recently taught and an unfamiliar text. After these think-alouds, I asked teachers to predict how students might respond and to describe how they would approach instruction with these texts. In using the think-aloud process, I hoped to better understand how these teachers' own reading practices with literature shaped their conceptions of student understanding.

The third interview focused on classroom artifacts of student learning. I asked each teacher to bring concrete artifacts that would show student understandings of literature from their classes. Artifacts could include journal writings, papers, drawings, tests, audiotapes, videotapes, or any other item by which teachers could evaluate student responses to literature. I asked teachers to bring in artifacts that they were genuinely puzzled by, or that they wanted to think about further, as well as artifacts they believed reflected a distinction between students' understanding and misunderstanding of literature. During the interview, I asked teachers to evaluate students' performances, to explain why they selected these artifacts, to discuss why they assessed these artifacts, and to talk about what kind of teaching support these students might need.

The fourth interview involved the student think-alouds. I first invited each student to read from both familiar and unfamiliar pieces of literature, in each case the same texts their own teachers had read in the second (think-aloud) interview. I videotaped and later reviewed each student think-aloud, selecting lengthy sections to present to the teachers. I brought the videotape selections to the fourth interview and used these as texts for discussion. I did not prepare specific questions to direct teacher responses. Instead, I gave each teacher a VCR remote control and had each pause the tape when she or he had a thought or reaction. Occasionally I paused the tape myself to ask about a teacher's reaction to a particular segment. After viewing the videotape, I asked each teacher to make judgments about the student's literary thinking.

Data Analysis

Each interview audiotape was transcribed verbatim and then summarized for quick reference. In summarizing, I reduced every two to five pages of transcript data to brief paragraphs and wrote notes to capture my first impressions. (An example of this summary approach is provided in Appendix A.) Transcripts were then coded to search out general patterns and themes. The coding categories were guided by studies that emphasize the nature of pedagogical content knowledge (Grossman, 1990; Shulman, 1986, 1987) and specific dimensions of that knowledge, such as curricular knowledge and knowledge of instructional strategies. Such studies have highlighted the importance of teacher understanding of student disciplinary understandings, but they have not looked closely at this dimension. In coding, I assumed three broad knowledge categories related to my research questions (see Table 1) and then looked inductively for the ways these categories played out in teachers' comments.

For example, one category focused on teachers' conceptions of student literary understanding. In reading the transcripts, various sub-categories emerged related to this focus, such as teachers' beliefs about what motivates students with

TABLE 1: **Initial Coding Categories**

Category	Code	Example
Conceptions of Student Understanding of Literature (CSU)	AUDIENCE (AUD) Implied audience for literature curriculum; who teacher aims literature curriculum for and why.	*". . . some of the literature we do is—not that we don't have that literature, you know, as a good thing for them to learn, but that when we're dealing with a general run of students, we're really aiming like at the upper middle rather than at the broadest spectrum of students in how we expect them to come through it." (Andrew)*
	*MOTIVATION (MOT) Motivating forces for students reading literature; conceptions of why students like or dislike literature; teacher expectations for motivation.	*"Many of them are just more interested in, 'Oh my god, I just got up and here I'm in class and I have to stay awake and listen to this stuff,' so it's hard to motivate them." (Caroline)*
	*RESOURCES (RES) Resources and strategies kids bring to literature; typical and atypical strengths kids bring to reading literature.	*"I think that the little bit of poetry that I taught last year, they were—some of them were very good at questioning . . . I mean they seemed to be able to pick out the lines that must have some meaning." (Ellen)*
	*DIFFICULTIES (DIFF) What kids find puzzling or difficult in reading literature; typical and atypical misconceptions or problems.	*". . . they think they have to come up with the answer that I'm going to come up with as far as how to interpret what they're reading, and I think that's what makes it boring, that they don't feel they can read it and enjoy it." (Ellen)*
	SOCIAL FACTORS (SOC) Beliefs about social contexts and how they influence student understanding of literature.	*"We have done discussion on these stories. And I think a lot of what she says is reflective of some of the things we talked about. So I'm not sure how much of this thinking is—would have appeared the same way without the discussion." (Andrew)*
Knowledge Sources for Teacher Understanding of Student Literary Understanding (KS)	*READING (RP) Teacher reading practices and history/experience as a student.	*"Oh, well I associate my experiences with what is in the poem, but this—as a child he really liked wells and pumps with buckets and windlasses—who can walk past a ditch or water when you're a little kid without throwing a rock in it or stomping in it, you know?"(Caroline)*
	TEACHER EDUCATION (TE) Formal teacher education experience; learning through teacher ed courses, inservice, or fieldwork.	*"Basically, the professor's philosophy was that literature is something you need to do in the classroom. You need to read it with them; you need to talk about it regularly. You can't just hand them the book and tell them to go read it and test them at the end of it. You have to work them through it." (Andrew)*
	TEACHING EXPERIENCE (TX) Ongoing teaching experience, including student observation, assessment of learning artifacts, interactions with colleagues.	*". . . and that's my job as a teacher to know that a story is hard to get into. So then I'll have us, the whole class, start the story and get into it, and then they can go from there. But that's my job to see that [difficulty with access], and experience tells me that." (Caroline)*

continued

TABLE 1: **Continued**

Category	Code	Example
	*CONCEPTION OF LITERARY UNDERSTANDING (CLU) Teacher beliefs about what literature is, purposes for teaching literature, and what it means to understand literary texts.	*"I would like them to think of literature as a vital interpretation of life's possibilities and that literature offers answers and questions about what it means to be human . . . So to get literature I think at some level is to get life." (Andrew)*
Instructional Practices (IP)	CURRICULAR STRUCTURE (CURR) How teacher structures literature curriculum for students.	*"The first semester I taught Classical Literature . . . so we did mythology. So all that applied to the* Illiad, *and then chronologically we went to the* Odyssey, *and then all these stories were repeated in the* Oresteia *plays, so it was constant building." (Ellen)*
	ACTIVITIES (ACT) Typical classroom activities,what students are asked to do in class.	*"Okay. They get the book. I talk about Fitzgerald the first day. I talk about his background, biographical things . . . And then I usually . . . read a couple pages at the start of the book to, first of all to point out setting, and to get beyond what, in that book is a couple pages of introductory material that may confuse them . . . And then indicate where they're going, or where the book is going and what they can expect, say for the remainder of the chapter, because I don't read all—the whole thing on this day. Then they're left to read." (Andrew)*
	DISCOURSE (DISC) Nature of classroom discourse, kinds of questions asked, monologic vs. dialogic.	*"So what I usually do is elicit from the class what are their thoughts, and, as they are giving me things, to organize what they're doing on the board, and then if I have something else in mind that I want to do, I pull it out of that and slip it in." (Caroline)*
	EVALUATION (EVAL) Evaluation/assessment tools, concrete methods for assessing student understanding of literature.	*"I know that a lot of kids don't write very well or aren't comfortable writing, but they can show their understanding in different ways. So I tried to find another outlet . . . so I chose a project and what they had to do was choose a passage in the book and somehow interpret it visually." (Ellen)*

*Analysis concentrated on starred topics

literature, about the resources and strategies students bring to literature, and about difficulties students have with literary texts. A second category focused on knowledge sources for teachers' understanding of student understanding. Sub-categories emerging here included personal reading strategies, history/experience with literature, departmental context, teacher education, and teachers' theoretical beliefs about literature. A third category focused on instructional practices related to teachers' assumptions about students. Sub-categories included curricular

TABLE 2: **Example of Refined Categories for CSU-RES (Resources Students Bring to Their Reading of Literature).** ***Teacher: Caroline***

Sub-category	Coded Text
Experience, Everyday Knowledge	"They would understand that . . . they've all been children and all I would have to say is remember when you were a kid, and you went out and . . . you did ABC, and they start talking about it right away. Their memories. And then it's always fun to just let them go free and then to take what they have said and pull it back into the poem."
School Knowledge	"They also are required to take World Literature as sophomores. Many of them can use their history then to bring that to the literature. Although these are juniors and seniors, I am always happy to remind them that what they have taken as sophomores is applicable to what they are taking as juniors and seniors, so I like to bring that connection and that these classes are not in isolation."
Ability Level	"Those who have experience and this inherent quality to understand poetry will get it, and they'll help lead the others."
Language/Reading Skills	"They would see this because they are sensitive to words. Some of them are debaters and they understand how words can be used to sway and make people feel. . . .And I think they would respond to the language and the imagery . . . "
Ways of Reading	"Well, he and I have different philosophies, I think, about where we're coming from, and that's true of even people who have experience as I do, some of them want to interject their own interpretation."

structure, classroom activities, classroom discourse, and evaluation practices. I kept the sub-categories themselves broad, not wanting to over-determine or fragment the data. I did want to group generally related chunks of data in a way that would promote theory building. In this article I concentrate especially on themes emerging from the starred (*) sub-categories in the first two columns of Table 1, as these challenged my own starting points about how English teachers might approach student understanding.

After coding transcripts by categories and sub-categories, I focused on building each teacher's case. To do so, I re-read the sub-categorized transcript passages and noted recurrent patterns within sub-categories, as well as data that conflicted with those patterns. I used field notes from class observations, which I had summarized separately, to reinforce or contradict these readings. As I analyzed each case, I developed even finer categories under each sub-category. Under "Resources and strategies students bring to literature" (code CSU-RES) for example, I created a data table for each case, showing the various conceptions teachers had of their students' resources and strategies. Table 2 provides an example of such refined categories with samples of coded text.

After coding, I wrote an analytic memo providing informational background on each teacher and describing what I saw in each teacher's thinking about student understanding.

The next stage of analysis involved cross-case comparisons of data, searching reiteratively across the memos and transcripts to identify shared patterns, themes, and discrepancies across cases. This process was essential in capturing shades of difference in the transcripts and helped guard against over-simplified notions of teacher thinking.

Methodological Concerns

A few limitations of this study must be highlighted. First, since I relied on a single site, the teacher thinking I report here will reflect local, school-specific influences. Many studies suggest the significant role teaching context can play in teacher decision-making (Grossman, Thompson, & Dingus,1999; Louis, Marks, & Kruse, 1996; McLaughlin, 1993; Newell & Holt, 1997). This study, then, may reflect teacher thinking especially unique to Shaw High School or to the English department at this school, factors that would best be illuminated by comparisons with cases from different settings. Secondly, I observed each teacher up to five times over the course of three months, yet, as Hillocks (1999) suggests, classroom observations are often essential to understanding subtleties of teacher thinking. While the data collection for this study centered on the interviews, longer-term observations may have revealed additional aspects of teacher thinking. Indeed, I gained great insights from observing less than a handful of instructional periods. More classroom data would have supported a richer analysis.

Findings

In this section, I introduce each participant based on information gathered from the first interview and the survey. After these profiles, I focus on (a) the teachers' attempts to come to terms with students' readings of literary texts and (b) their efforts to learn more, using videotape artifacts, about their students' ways with literature.

Participant Profiles

Andrew

Andrew Bevington, an English teacher for over twelve years, had enjoyed reading literature for as long as he could remember. He ranked his content knowledge in literature 4 out of 6 on the survey. Andrew said that he read consistently as a young person and that "reading was never a problem for me." Despite some personal ambivalence toward school as an adolescent, Andrew drew sustenance from literature, which played an important role as he coped with the stresses of teenage life. "I used to read a lot even in high school," he told me, "to the point of reading under the covers with a flashlight, you know. But it was, it was a kind of escape from other things, it was a way to be away, you know—not there. Literature, you know, I've enjoyed most of my life." Andrew found an academic calling in college and became a literature major. His teaching load at Shaw included general English,

creative writing, and American literature classes.

Andrew expressed initial uncertainty toward the focus of my interviews. In our first interview, for example, I asked how he went about determining what his students knew about literature, and what they needed to learn. He replied somewhat hesitantly:

> I probably (slight pause), I probably don't. I mean I determine what they know about the units that we are dealing with, but I don't think I ever go into what they know about literature. You know, what level they are at . . . I don't have any standard beginning that lets me know where they are, and I'm not sure that it would do me much good if I did. What they need to know I expect to go over with them.

Andrew indicated that what students need to know is provided for in the given curriculum rather than in any investigation of students' responses. It was not evident to him, for instance, how one would go about investigating student literary thinking or how such an investigation might support his teaching. He was, however, quite interested in learning how to motivate students to engage with literature.

Caroline

Caroline Daly, a department co-chair in English, had 26 years of experience teaching literature at the time of our interviews. She reported having taken over forty courses related to literature and ranked herself 6 out of 6 in terms of content knowledge. Caroline reported taking university classes during summers "to pursue more work in literature," as she put it. She had received her Masters degree in English from a major state university, had taught part-time at a local community college, and was a recipient of a National Endowment for the Humanities Scholarship. Caroline became an English Literature major during her undergraduate years, focusing especially on what she identified as "Beginnings to 1660," and her interests as a literature teacher continued to be shaped by this concentration. She had taught English Literature for 25 years and referred to herself as a "medievalist" at heart. Juniors and seniors in her classes read classics such as Dante's *Inferno*, *The Canterbury Tales*, Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*, and *Don Quixote*.

Caroline brought a distinct optimism toward students and student learning. Many of her general comments reflected the fact that she kept faith with students, even if they initially took on resistant attitudes toward literature. She spoke, for example, of a sophomore she was teaching for the second year in a row:

> He was in my sophomore drama poetry class, and he—poetry is just kind of like, phhtt, over his head. He's, as a sophomore, he was really adamant against reading the poetry. By the time we got through, he thought it was kind of cool (chuckle) and he has really grown up, so it is fun to watch him.

Caroline expressed the enjoyment she receives as young students are drawn toward literature. She noted that despite some squirrelly behavior, sophomores tend to surprise her in positive ways: "That's why teaching is fun, as I said, (laughter) kids never cease to amaze you. It can go the other way, too, but not as often as the positive way."

Ellen

Ellen Frazier, a second-year English teacher, was the youngest teacher in the study. She ranked her experience teaching literature 2 out of 6 on the initial survey, although she noted she had an "extensive background in reading, analyzing, and interpreting literature." Ellen explained that her sense of purpose in teaching literature, namely, to give students more voice and ownership with texts, had been sparked by her own secondary school experience, where lack of such ownership was the norm. As a university student, she experienced a zeal for literary interpretation, as the teaching focused on a seminar format, giving students a voice and not being bound by the teacher's perspective. Before coming to Shaw, she completed her B.A. with an emphasis in writing, then worked for a few years before completing a teacher certification program in English. In her two years at Shaw, Ellen had taught primarily writing courses. She taught two sections of literature the year prior to our interviews but said she felt far more confident with the writing curriculum.

In assessing how students learn with literature, Ellen said she primarily used writing. She felt she had few other valid ways to evaluate students' individual understandings, and she was able to rely on her own background in writing for such assessments.

> So anyway, we do a lot of writing and I haven't figured out how to teach it without making kids, making them write a lot, and I don't have—I have a better understanding of their understanding when they're able to write about it, because I can't really tell from the classroom discussions because they may understand it but just be too timid to speak. Or they may not understand it but they have developed a way of responding that makes them appear to understand. So it nearly killed me come grading, but they did a lot of writing.

Ellen's emphasis on writing revealed her commitment to students' understandings of literature and a general dissatisfaction with common multiple-choice assessments.

Coming to Terms with Students' Readings

For Andrew, Caroline, and Ellen, reading ability—that is, comprehension skills and knowledge of vocabulary—were common concerns as they considered their students' responses to literature. This emphasis surprised me, given my own assumption that English teachers would focus on content-oriented, disciplinary

TABLE 3: **Refined Categories for CSU-DIFF (Students' Difficulties with Literature)**

	Frequency of Codes	Examples of Coded Data
Complexity & Access	25 coded excerpts	"When I assign *Gatsby* and some students read the first chapter—[they say] 'I wonder what happened.'" (Andrew) "The beginning of *Cyrano* is so confusing, there are so many characters and it jumps from this group of people talking to this group . . ." (Caroline)
Motivation	15	"A lot of students, when they get to the point where they're a senior and they've done this for all these years, they just don't want any more. It's very difficult." (Ellen) "They will come in and say 'it's boring,' but once we get into it, they drop that. I think it's just cool to say that this is boring . . . that's a posture they need to take." (Caroline)
Reading Skills & Vocabulary	42	"Some kids, and this is I think typical of most kids, will not stop and look up a word, so they could go through a whole piece with 50 words in it that they didn't know and not think twice about getting to the end, waiting for someone to tell them what it meant." (Ellen) (also coded as "Motivation") ". . . and I think for many of them it's just difficult to read, to keep focused." (Andrew)
Innate Abilities	10	"She is a—she's not a great thinker to begin with. This is probably as intellectual a paper as I've seen from her." (Andrew) "There are so many reasons why kids don't read. There may be something physically wrong in the child. He is dyslexic. Maybe his eyes weren't checked when he was young. . . ." (Caroline)
Interpretation; Reflection on Significance	17	"A lot of students had the same kind of approach that I did. . . . Very few of them would trust themselves enough or feel comfortable enough with themselves to interpret it in some way and then expose themselves." (Ellen) "The really difficult thing I found with the majority of students is for them to understand the tie of humanity through all of time, which I've always found interesting that they don't see that immediately." (Caroline)

issues. Yet each teacher partitioned literature students, in some fashion, into readers and nonreaders, and each highlighted poor reading skills as an obstacle to literary understanding. Table 3 illustrates such responses.

The teachers together felt that a growing number of students need significant help with what might be called basic reading. Identifying who might provide such support, and how, however, were more difficult questions. Indeed, if concern for reading skill remained consistent across cases, less clear was how these teachers understood reading in the context of the discipline—how basic reading is related to the literature curriculum in general and what it means to be a skilled reader of literature. In what follows, I focus on the teachers' tendencies to disconnect reading from literary understanding and on the theories of reading that emerged as each teacher discussed students' responses to literary texts.

Disconnecting Reading and Literary Understanding

Andrew, Caroline, and Ellen all believed that reading involves a generic set of skills that lays the groundwork for disciplinary thinking. Each teacher recognized reading as critical to the study of literature; yet, each also placed the act of reading as conceptually prior to the actual subject-matter concerns of English. Each, for example, detached reading issues from her or his own literature curriculum. Such sentiments arose especially as we discussed the difficulties students had with more advanced texts. Their talk about student reading emerged in each case as talk about something other than literature, most often about the need for skill remediation.

READING AS NON-LITERARY: ANDREW. Andrew's comments often relegated reading to lesser academic status and characterized reading as a set of technical skills. When I asked Andrew what makes literature difficult for his students, he replied:

> The ones who are having problems usually it's—the statement is "It's boring." . . . but it turns out "Well, I can't understand it." Now we have no reading program at the high school level and this is something, in fact, the department has been trying to work on for years to get. We literally have people in the high school reading at a fifth grade level. You give them *Gatsby*, they're not going to be able to understand much of it. This is one problem, just skill level.

Andrew admitted that his own ability to deal with lower readers was limited, and he felt he had neither expertise nor significant responsibility for student learning when it came to reading level. Some students "usually don't get through the first chapter" with texts like *The Great Gatsby*, he said. "It may not be their fault . . . but we have no reading program. We have very limited basic English, and I don't know how to bring the lower end particularly through the literature to the level that I appreciate it."

Andrew also explained that as a teacher, he often had difficulty distinguishing reading problems from lack of motivation. "Sometimes I think they really don't understand it," he said. "They read a sentence that doesn't—[they] don't know the connections that are being made between this sentence and the next, and why we're going there. Sometimes I think it's just an excuse for not paying attention." Andrew felt more certain, however, that whatever reading issues existed were not genuinely literary concerns. He concluded: "The ones who are trying to read and not getting it, I often feel are having just trouble reading. That it's not an issue of literature. It's a matter of just decoding words and putting them in the right order mentally." Andrew's technical notion of student reading here represents an intriguing contrast to his own experience with reading as a poorly motivated adolescent—his drive to read to "escape from other things," as "a way to be away," for example.

Uncertainty in Judging Readers: Caroline. Referring to her own English Literature and European Literature courses, Caroline similarly detached students' reading issues from the literature curriculum: "Usually kids who can't read," she explained, "will not choose those courses because they know they're harder. We have other courses for kids who don't read well." Low readers simply may not survive a challenging literature course, Caroline indicated. The teaching of reading, she implied further, is not the objective of literature classes. Like Andrew and Ellen, Caroline expressed limited confidence in her ability to judge students and their reading processes. Discussing one student's poorly written literary essay, Caroline speculated:

> Yea, I have a feeling she doesn't read well. Well, I don't know, though. When she read out in class . . . she read fine. But it wasn't long. . . . Now when she gets to paragraphs and that sort of thing I don't know. And I haven't looked up her reading score—to tell how well she reads.

When I asked Caroline what she expected from the reading scores, she replied "comprehension, reading speed, all that you get on those reading tests." Such comments highlighted a noticeable difference between Caroline's sense of literary expertise and her sense of expertise regarding her students as readers. The more distanced position that she adopted around issues of reading matched Caroline's teaching identity as an academic specialist drawn to British medieval literature.

Do Poor Readers Belong? Ellen. Ellen's comments echoed similar divisions between reading and literature. She explained that she had been rudely awakened during her first year of teaching when she discovered her students could not read well. She had assumed that students in high school classes would be independent readers: "Well, first I assumed that everyone in my class could read, which is not the case. . . . Well, they could read but not the level of literature that we were reading. They could read the words but they couldn't comprehend them." Discussing one of her classes, she observed,

> We just had kids in there who belonged in AP English, but they didn't want the responsibility, and I had kids in there who could barely read, belonged in Basic [English], so it was very difficult to do a lot with that group.

Ellen, like Andrew, felt that problems in understanding literature correlated with low reading levels, and that differing reading levels created significant problems for literature instruction. She, too, suggested that better tracking of low readers might make a difference. She also remained uncertain about her own efforts to monitor and support students as readers. Some students simply gave up on reading hard texts, she said, and she ended up using techniques she was not sure she even believed in. She described her efforts:

> Well, I had to give quizzes, had to give reading quizzes because they wouldn't read it unless they knew they were going to be responsible for a quiz. Um, vocabulary quizzes, and I don't what all else I did, but I don't, you know, I feel like in time I will develop better ways to do it, but last year I was just kind of thrown in there and I didn't—I just did what I had been taught, and that's how I did it.

Ellen was conflicted about such practices, as she re-enacted the methods she had resented in her own schooling, including those that served to diminish students' voice and ownership with texts.

Theories of Reading

READING AS REPRODUCTION: ANDREW AND CAROLINE. Observing their students read on videotape, Andrew and Caroline conceived of reading largely in terms of word-based decoding and emphasized reading as a technical activity—geared toward the exact reproduction of the text on the page. The oral reading of strong students, according to Andrew and Caroline, tends to be fluent and without significant error. The reading of weaker students, on the other hand, is characterized by miscues and inaccurate retellings. As he listened to two students think aloud, for example, Andrew drew attention to accurate decoding. He made brief observations of fluency as he listened to one student read: "She's misreading occasionally. She's missing words." When the student finished commenting on a short chapter from a novel, Andrew observed:

> Yeah, there was, there were several things she didn't understand in there. She paused on that car, the "Marmon," which I certainly didn't recognize when I ran into it either, but she didn't seem to know what a "switch engine" was. She went right over that without making the comparison that this meant it was a very large car. She went from "vases" to "vase" on her last pronunciation.

After listening to a second student's think-aloud, he made a comparison: "First of all, he's reading better than she did. He seems to—I haven't seen him miss a word yet."

Caroline, like Andrew, drew strong connections between word recognition and overall reading ability. When I asked Caroline why young people find literature difficult, for example, she speculated, "Maybe they can't read very well. Their vocabularies are really shallow." Observing the videotape of one of her students reading literature, Caroline focused first on vocabulary and exact oral decoding: "He doesn't have a very good vocabulary, does he?" she said, after her student stumbled on the word "perpetually." After playing a portion of the video in which I had prompted the student to "articulate his thinking," Caroline stopped the tape: "I'm wondering if he knows what the meaning of the word 'articulate' is," she mused. "Because if he doesn't understand 'dappled' and 'uncongealed,' then 'ar-

ticulate' would be maybe difficult for him, too." The student had mispronounced both words in the first paragraph of his reading.

Later, after more reading miscues, Caroline commented again: "The vocabulary is getting in his way. . . . Yeah, I think the vocabulary is clouding his perception of what's going on. And it is tough vocabulary. And particularly as I suspect that he's a kid who doesn't read a lot."

Overall, Andrew and Caroline were less sure, beyond improving vocabulary, about how to support students with reading literature. Andrew had seldom actually observed students' reading processes, and since reading had never been a problem for him, he found it difficult to relate to the various problems students might have. Caroline maintained her optimism about poor readers in her literature classes, hoping that they would eventually come around through a combination of interesting texts, teacher knowledge of such texts, discussion, and attention to basics like vocabulary.

Reading as Problem Solving: Ellen. Ellen's emphasis on reading differed from that of her colleagues. The primary distinction she made was between those students who "read for understanding," as she put it, and those who "read to get done." Students who read for understanding are aware when they are confused, and will re-read until they understand. Students who read poorly, Ellen explained, typically decode without attending to their thinking processes. She noted that they often confuse decoding with the more complex processes of reading itself.

> There are some kids who will just read through the whole thing and not understand what they're reading, but they'll come to class and say, "I read it." And you'll say, "Well, what did you think about this?" "Oh, I didn't really understand that." "Why don't you read it again?" It doesn't ever occur to them to read something twice because they don't get it the first time.

For Ellen, students who read to "get done" may decode efficiently, but they usually don't understand the work involved in making sense from texts. Students often "notice things [but] they don't see the connections, if it requires more work than just what's on the surface," Ellen explained. Successful readers, on the other hand, put forth individual effort with texts. As she observed one student read the opening chapter of *Lord of the Flies*, Ellen admired the student's tendency to puzzle over grammatically complex sentences and difficult vocabulary:

> I'm just thinking that she's reading for understanding because . . . this is not making sense to her. . . . She's working very hard to figure out how it makes sense. Um, and I noticed that before in the first couple of sentences. She stopped, when she stumbled on a word, to make sure she had the right word.

This student, Ellen noted, was "very aware" of her confusion and became "bothered" when language didn't fit or make sense, and she paused on lines or

words that were unclear to her. The student sometimes didn't resolve such difficulties immediately, but the fact that the student was "working very hard" with a text—re-reading, puzzling, visualizing—distinguished her as an effective reader for Ellen.

Ellen felt less confident, however, explaining why most students fail to monitor in this way, and what she as a teacher might do about it. For example, Ellen reported that when students weren't following one text successfully in class, she slowed down to focus on the basic plot and character names, teaching goals Ellen characterized as "very simple." Ellen felt uncomfortable with some of the practices she resorted to:

> So it's hard, because I see myself sometimes forced to do certain things like . . . I made them weed [vocabulary] out and I had to give them a quiz because they wouldn't study if I didn't quiz them, and I had to have grades for them. So, I don't really like that. I liked the college courses that I have where you wrote papers and you had an essay final.

Ellen felt especially challenged by this dilemma, explaining that her own attempts to help students read successfully ended up producing negativity in some students and reinforced for them the artificiality of school literature, something Ellen hoped to avoid in her teaching. In addition, it pulled Ellen away from the kinds of writing assessments she felt were most valuable for student understanding.

Learning about Students' Ways with Literature

How might English teachers learn more about their students' readings of literature? What sources or activities support growth in teacher thinking about student literary understanding? In the section that follows, I explore the teachers' responses to my efforts to stimulate thinking about student understanding. I show both productive and problematic dimensions of their engagement with videotapes of student literary thinking. First, I focus on Caroline and Andrew as each teacher began to re-orient their conceptions of students as readers. Next, I focus on Ellen and Caroline to show how their teacher observations were informed by expert reading practices—practices that steered pedagogic thinking away from the details of student understanding.[2]

Re-orienting Conceptions: Caroline and Andrew

Observing students reading aloud, Caroline and Andrew confirmed for themselves that teaching vocabulary is important and that weak readers often have difficulty decoding texts exactly as they are written. However, Caroline and Andrew also found phenomena they hadn't predicted, reading practices that didn't easily fit a reading-as-reproduction theory.

Easing the Bond between Decoding and Understanding: Caroline. One issue which caused reconsideration for Caroline was one student's continued "extemporizing," as she put it, or his tendency to read words differently than they were

written on the page. Caroline criticized this student's reading initially, yet as she listened to his verbalized thoughts and reactions to a narrative text, she found that he was "getting" a great deal of what was there. Despite several reading miscues and stated confusion at the start of one passage, for instance, the student stopped soon after to summarize what he had read. The student concluded:

> The scene was done. All that was left was the body bags. There was nothing left for him there. Everybody [has] already been talked to, but it didn't matter because it was—tonight's news was over and it was going to be for tomorrow. . . . I'm starting to piece it together.

Stopping the tape herself, Caroline commented on this summary, suggesting some dissonance between her own picture of reading and the student's observed practice:

> Yeah, he's getting the general gist of this even though (laughter) he doesn't know what it's all about. Well, that he—I find that amazing that he's having a terrible time getting through this. He's not interested in it, but it's still saying the core of what the story is about, but he's not intrigued enough to want to go on.

As she worked through the conflict in her perceptions, Caroline shifted her view. She asserted that, rather than being a matter of poor skills, the student seemed "not interested" or "not intrigued" with the text. Later in the videotape, however, the student pointedly criticized the main character's approach to her news-reporting job (reading aloud is in italics):

> It says right here *she was a stick-and-move artist moving from a* [text=living off the] *police scanner and hitting the scene, getting a few names and a few quotes, and a little local color.* She's just there for the glamour. She's not there because she wants to know about the news, and she's not there because she wants the people to know about the news, she's just there because it's like, well, that's my job, or I have to do that. I'm a reporter, I have to get a little bit. It's unimportant to her. I mean I would be a little bit more concerned if I was her—people had died and there's been an assassination. I mean I would be a little bit more concerned, a little more in depth for the people that have just died.

With noticeable engagement, the student had generalized about the main character's ethics, provided evidence, placed himself into the character's role, compared his own potential reaction with hers, and taken a personal stand. Caroline reacted with some surprise and adjusted her sense of the student's interest level in this text:

> I am impressed that he does understand pretty much what this is on, and he hits this about she is a stick-and-move artist. He hit that, he likes that. Or at least he understands it. I'm not sure he likes it but he understands it and so, yeah. . . . Even though he thought it was a man, you know, still he understood the basic characteristics of the character.

Observing her student read, however, Caroline felt torn in her evaluation. She recognized that he was "going for the meaning," as she put it, rather than using exact decoding, and that he was having success in the process. Yet she still suspected his decoding problems would result in distortion of the literature. Caroline acknowledged in the end, however, that this student's way of reading might differ from her own.

> I don't know (chuckle). As this follow-the-rules type of person, I like to read what the translation tells me here because that's the piece of literature. But I guess I'm more of a left-brain person that's not quite that creative. I kind of like to stick with what's here, and then do my interpreting from what is there, but . . . I think that that is the way he reads.

Caroline's observation of this student's reading thus became a moment for potential teacher learning. Caroline began to transform her sense of successful reading as exact reproduction, and she cast about for alternative ways to understand the student's response. Importantly, Caroline started the process of foregrounding her own ways with texts, her own assumptions ("As this follow-the-rules person. . . ," "I guess I'm more of a left-brained person . . .") and placing such assumptions, even uncomfortably, in relation to her student's way of reading. Her wondering left both of us with new questions: If Caroline is "follow-the-rules," then what rules exist for literary readings? Are there alternative ways to read and respond to literature? How important is exact decoding in reading literature? Can a kid read poorly but understand literature well?

CONNECTING READING AND SOCIAL CONTEXT: ANDREW. A different issue arose for Andrew, as he listened to one of his students reading a passage from Richard Wright's collection, *Uncle Tom's Children.* The female student read aloud a description of a woman nursing her child and remarked to me, her interviewer, that it was awkward to read aloud about breastfeeding in front of a male:

> I don't know, I just—like reading it, especially you being a guy and talking about a woman's breasts. She was breast feeding the child. I think that's odd. But I mean it's the literature so you just keep on reading it, but that one I felt uncomfortable.

Andrew responded to the videotape, wondering aloud about the social context of the reading interview and its effects on his student's reading: "Her comment at this point is addressed to your presence rather than her reading of the story, as I'm hearing it . . . so does this change how she is reading in some way?" Andrew initially separated my "presence" from the student's "reading of the story," although he recognized there was some interaction between the two. Andrew felt, in fact, that her reaction was a fairly common one: "You don't usually talk about private body parts to relative strangers," he explained. These observations raised issues that had

not emerged in our earlier talk about student reading. Andrew noted, "she's aware of this environment around her . . . as she's reading." His comments, at least momentarily, seemed to focus less on a single individual's processes and more on reading as a public or social event. When we talked about whether my presence was creating a different kind of reading, Andrew concluded: "Well, I mean it must be a different process since she's reacting differently than she would if she was alone."

Such immediate observations raised issues with potentially significant consequences. Is a school reading a public or a private event? How does social context influence students' response to texts? What kind of reader, individual or social, does Andrew assume in teaching literature? Such implicit questions offered alternative frameworks for considering student reading, beyond the measurement of literal accuracy. In fact, Andrew became generally more open to learning about students' experiences with literature as our interviews progressed. After talking about the process of thinking aloud, for instance, he remarked, "Obviously you're aware of reading-thinking connections that I'm not, or that I have paid no attention to, and I suppose what you're doing is teaching me this . . . so that I will become more aware of it."

Experienced Reading and Student Understanding: Ellen and Caroline

Beliefs about student understanding were also firmly grounded, as I will show below, in particular ways of drawing on teachers' own experience in reading literature—ways that place the details of students' responses to texts in the background. Rabinowitz (1998) argues that as literature teachers teach texts repeatedly, their perceptions and evaluations of students are shaped by remembered readings—readings that favor coherence in texts, assume the whole design of a piece, start with established themes and patterns in mind, and so on. By contrast, configurational readings reflect the haphazard piecing together that occurs on first readings, as students try to make sense of unfamiliar territory. In this regard, teachers' strategic expertise with literature may limit their perceptions of students' first readings, so that teachers see only students' lack of coherence rather than healthy strategic configurations—a classic deficit stance. Below, I focus on Ellen and Caroline, the least and most experienced teachers respectively, using excerpts from their own text readings in interview two.

Strategies Embedded within a Remembered Reading: Ellen. Ellen, reading *Lord of the Flies*, a novel she knew well and had taught the previous year, appeared to draw on strategies of both configuration and coherence as she spoke about the opening paragraphs. For example, she worked hard to visualize the opening scene, which involves the aftermath of a plane crash:

> "Smashed into the jungle," that gives me an image I'm going to remember. . . . Words like "clambering," I can see him kind of working very hard to get somewhere. She formed

expectations about what might happen next: What other people they're going to find. What more about their past is going to be revealed? What about the pilot?

Yet Ellen's reading suggests that in re-enacting first readings or envisioning their students' first readings, teachers still work against memory. Indeed, as she proceeded, Ellen began to assume a coherence stance. Specifically, she focused attention on a binary opposition she saw at work in the opening pages:

> *He bent down, removed the thorns carefully, and turned around. He was shorter than the fair boy and very fat. He came forward, searching out safe lodgments for his feet, and then looked up through thick spectacles.* See these two as opposites. One is thin, one is fat. One is taller, one is shorter. They're referring to—one is referred to as "the fair boy," so obviously the other one is not fair. And he's wearing glasses and the other one is not.

Here, it is difficult to judge whether Ellen's reading is a remembered one, since her experience as an English major may sensitize her to such oppositions even in unfamiliar texts. Yet, Ellen went on to explain that reading the chapter this time, she had seen something she hadn't seen before, "evidence of the setup" of this opposition for the entire book. "Oh, just the body language between the two," she said. "Well, just the—how automatically Piggy was following Ralph. He's never even walking with him. He's always behind him. Wanting to be accepted. Wanting to be noticed." Ellen also found a playful headstand by Ralph worth noting, since "that's important for the rest of the story, how that [playfulness] changes." Ellen's attention to the author's "setup" suggests that her skillful associations, in this case of binary oppositions, reflect strategic disciplinary thinking embedded within earlier readings. As might be expected, she was reading the first chapter in light of what she already understood about the eventual power dynamic between two central characters. As Rabinowitz suggests, such an experienced reading is different in kind rather than degree from first readings of literature.

MATCHING STUDENT THINKING WITH EXPERT CONCLUSIONS: CAROLINE. The most emphasis on coherence came from Caroline. This may reflect Caroline's level of experience and high content knowledge with the text she was teaching. It may also reflect the fact that Caroline read the final scene of a play she was currently teaching, rather than early paragraphs as Ellen had. Creating coherence, in other words, may be a stance we can especially expect experienced readers to take as they come to the end of a text, although as Langer (1995) points out, this kind of stance does not necessarily wait upon other stances to emerge. For her familiar text, Caroline read from Act V of *Cyrano de Bergerac.* The passage includes Cyrano's final words, as he stands mortally wounded before his friends. I provide two excerpts of Caroline's reading at length, with her text reading italicized [bracketed names were not read aloud]:

[ROXANE:] *Your life has been unhappy because of me! Me!*

[CYRANO:] *No, Roxane, quite the contrary. Feminine sweetness was unknown to me. My mother made it clear that she didn't find me pleasant to look at. I had no sister. Later, I dreaded the thought of seeing mockery in the eyes of a mistress. Thanks to you, I've at least had a woman's friendship, a gracious presence to soften the harsh loneliness of my life.* In all the while that I'm reading *Cyrano*, I always have this feeling of the poignancy of this sweet inner soul that is so ugly on the outside, and this is so touching because his mother didn't find him pleasant to look at, and just about every mother thinks her baby is beautiful. But Roxane has been able to fill that void for him . . .

In this response, Caroline explicitly refers to her experience with the text and presumably earlier readings ("In all the while I'm reading *Cyrano*, I always . . . "), as she shares her own affective response to the passage. She embeds her personal connection ("just about every mother. . . .") within an evolved view of Cyrano's character ("this sweet inner soul"), one that takes into account Cyrano's actions throughout the play rather than in this one passage.[3]

Caroline continues:

What's that you say? It's useless? Of course, but I've never needed hope of victory to make me fight! The noblest battles are always fought in vain! You there, all of you, who are you? Your numbers seem endless. . . . Ah, I recognize you now: my old enemies! Lies! My greetings to you! The bravado he has always had in his life he has to the end, and part of this is show for Roxane, too, as well as for his own being . . . I'm going to stand for myself, I never needed the hope of victory to make me fight. Battles are fought in vain, like the hundred to one. And that's also a balance that Rostand has done here, that the first act is very much like the fifth act. They echo each other, the entrances of Cyrano.

Caroline's approach reflects a high degree of disciplinary knowledge, such as familiarity with the assumptions of New Critical theory and knowledge of specific themes and structures for this play. Caroline explains how Cyrano's personality and life history relate to his current posture in death—connecting different parts of the story together, seeing consistency in Cyrano's actions throughout play. She also continues to step back from the text, objectifying an authorial strategy at work throughout the play, namely the "balance" and "echo" from Act 1 to Act 5. Less tentative or exploratory in her responses than Ellen or Andrew, Caroline's efforts to make sense of the ending exhibited little uncertainty, as if Caroline could draw easily upon a set of well-formed ideas. Caroline did not stop and puzzle over potentially confusing passages. She did not stop, for instance, to wonder about Cyrano's strange, delusional conversation with abstract vices ("my old enemies!"). Caroline's reading showed no second-guessing, either, with respect to either the literal or symbolic meanings of the play's final image, "my white plume." Her reading was distinct from Ellen's in that it was so explicitly a remembered reading.

Caroline did not attempt to role-play or pretend a first encounter with this part of the play.

The power of Caroline's reading against memory is also highlighted when compared with a student's first reading of *Cyrano* and in her comments on that reading. In the transcript excerpt below, Caroline observed one of her own students reading from the same passage that she herself had read above, in which Cyrano is dying before his friends. In the weeks preceding this interview, Caroline had taught the play in class. Students had read in class, discussed, and watched parts of the story, including the ending, on video. However, the interviewed student informed me, before we began his think-aloud, that he hadn't actually read the final section on his own. The student's reading is given below [verbatim reading is italicized; think-aloud comments in plain text] followed by Caroline's responses:

> . . . *but I've needed hope of victory to make me fight*—(re-reads)—*but I never needed hope from* [text = "of"] *victory to make me fight.* Okay. *The noblest battles are always fought in vain!* . . . He—I missed a word. I missed "never." *I never hoped—I never hoped of needing victory—I never need—I never needed hope, a hope of victory to make me fight.* Which means he doesn't need—he doesn't need to know that he's going to win in order to fight. He'll fight for any cause. I lost my place now. *The noblest of battles are always fought in vain. You there, after all,* [text = "all of you"] *who are you? Your numbers seem endless. Ah, I recognize you now: my old enemies! Lies! My greetings to you! And here—here's Compromise! And Prejudice! And Cowardice! What's that? Come to terms with you? Never, never! Ah, there you are, Stupidity!* He's actually talking about himself in all this. He sees himself as a coward and stupidity. I don't know whether the prejudice comes in too. Maybe he's prejudice to people that are . . .

The student excerpt is interesting for a few reasons. The student monitors his understanding, stopping twice to retell or summarize parts of the passage in his own words. He recognizes, in other words, that the speech is not self-evident, that gaps need to be filled, that a "virtual text" must be created (Earthman, 1992; Iser, 1978). In the last comment, he attempts a complex inference—piecing together his knowledge of the story with Cyrano's references to a series of personified vices. The student notes, moreover, something about his own interpretation that doesn't fit well ("I don't know whether the prejudice comes in . . ."). He goes forward from here, satisfied, at least for the time, with his initial response.

Caroline made two responses during this video excerpt. First, as the student worked with the initial sentence, she commented briefly about his attention to words in reading: "And he does that often, skips over words. . . . He saw that 'never' is a very important word." Second, at the end of the segment, she discounts the student's interpretation:

> Yeah, I think he's missing this [laugh]. He's missing that these are the battles that Cyrano has always fought against, and that's—in here he's saying this is him looking at himself,

> but I think it's more what Cyrano sees in others. . . . He would never compromise, he would never be prejudiced, he would never show fear, and those are things that he has always fought against everywhere, and he sees these in—which, yeah, on second thought, I suppose you could see that in Cyrano, but I don't think Cyrano ever had those . . .

Caroline's disciplinary role, as expressed here, was not to identify the student's ways of thinking, stance, or strategic approach. Instead, she primarily addressed how the student's views differed from an established reading or whether he understood this established reading. She explained, for example, that he had not sensed the direction (outward rather than inward) of Cyrano's remarks and had failed to connect these words with Cyrano's mostly noble character throughout the play. Although she momentarily re-thought the student's interpretation, Caroline indicated in the end that the student had not yet understood this particular passage. Her dismissal of the student's interpretation is interesting, not because she was not positive about this student as a learner (which she was), but because she approached his responses in terms of a finished reading. Student understanding of literature, in this case, was measured by matching student conclusions with accepted or teacher/expert conclusions. In fact, when this student came to the end of his think-aloud and articulated coherent generalizations about the story and its ending, Caroline's comments were not about how the student had arrived at his views, but that she agreed with them: "That is great," she said, listening to his final comments. "He's got this lit down. He's got the story down. He knows it, you bet."

Discussion

Recent studies of literature instruction (e.g., Nystrand, 1997) have demonstrated the extent to which, through class discussion, teachers steer student interpretation toward received interpretations. This study helps us see why. The transcript excerpts above show teachers drawing upon finished, coherent readings as they conceptualize student literary understanding. The data also suggest how difficult and counter-intuitive it may be for English teachers to approach student thinking from learner perspectives. Teachers like Andrew, Caroline, and Ellen not only draw upon their own experienced readings as measures, but their literacy assumptions direct attention away from students at a crucial moment—as students formulate their responses to texts.

This study is not an indictment of the disciplinary expertise literature teachers bring to their teaching. As Gadamer suggests, understanding student understanding involves not erasing one's proficiency, but learning to identify the limits and boundaries of the expert's perspective, to begin to suspend and place expertise in relation to learner perspectives. In this respect, teachers' developed ways of reading literature are powerful resources. But these resources are not enough. They must be embedded within both a reflective sensitivity to student perspectives and

alternative frames/tools for inquiring into such perspectives. Andrew, Caroline, and Ellen each show evidence of the former, but have far less access to the latter.

Andrew, Caroline, and Ellen each constructed reading as a neutral basis for literary understanding. The notion of reading as foundation reflected an underlying ambivalence, with reading central to student understanding but peripheral to literature teaching itself. The teachers situated reading ultimately as a separate individual and academic task to be dealt with outside of, and usually prior to, the work of the literature curriculum. Such beliefs echo those of the elementary teachers studied by Walmsley (1992), for whom literature was something kids do *after* they have learned to read rather than something to help them read. The implication for each teacher, though not stated explicitly, was that adequate reading skills are a given for literature class, an assumption which left teachers little impetus to examine or investigate their students' practices with texts. Interestingly, given their experiences in English classrooms, no teacher actually expected every student to be a successful reader. Rather, the teachers' conception of reading as foundation left them with a substantial reading dilemma. They assumed independent readers in theory, knew they would get problem readers in reality, and remained at a distance from readers and reading difficulties pedagogically.

The literature teachers in this study thus live with a fundamental question about their work unresolved: What is the relationship between reading and literary understanding? And who has responsibility for supporting students as readers of disciplinary texts? Content-area reading courses, often state mandated, currently attempt to address such issues for secondary teachers. Yet, such general methods coursework, while thoughtfully designed in many cases, may only tacitly reinforce the divide secondary teachers expect between their disciplines and reading. Ironically, general literacy courses may be the only places that explicitly treat students' actual interactions with print, the reading processes students use to generate meaning, and various ways teachers might support reading. Indeed, if general methods coursework is of limited help, this study suggests also the inadequacy of subject-specific coursework that fails to look closely at students' disciplinary reading transactions, and at how teachers can respond to students' actual encounters with texts.

Reader-response methods represent a contentious issue in this discussion. Response methods have effectively positioned students as meaning-makers in literature classrooms, but they have less successfully provided teachers with means for managing the reading difficulties students appear to have with complex literary texts. Indeed, the data above may appear to support the opinion that English education as a whole, enamored with response theory, has moved in the wrong direction, that response methods give too little attention to fundamental issues like comprehension. Yet, while some version of this problem may play out in practice, the argument inserts an unfortunate dichotomy between understanding (i.e.,

intellectual comprehension) and response (affective reaction) that is not helpful from a Gadamerian perspective. Response, as a theory of understanding, cannot be seen as separate from students' attempts to read/comprehend a text, as long as response involves ongoing questioning within a community. Moreover, Ellen, the most response-oriented teacher in the study, appears to care deeply about how well students read the complicated texts she assigns.

Response methods per se, then, are the wrong culprit. This study instead suggests relevant strengths within response-oriented pedagogy. Response methods, which encourage students to interact with texts on their own terms, have provided an opportunity for teachers to begin to assess what kids, in fact, do with literary texts. Response-oriented practices may lead teachers to begin to investigate key dimensions of student understanding, as Wilhelm (1997) argues. Response methods are rightly criticized for their neglect of socio-cultural and political dimensions of reading and for an individualistic bias, but attention to response is not antithetical to social or critical theories of reading. Attention to the details of student response, especially as students formulate ideas while reading, potentially supports critical and democratic interaction among students, as the role of student voice is strengthened in classrooms and a diversity of voices made apparent.

What, then, does this study ask us to reconsider? First, English teachers would benefit from subject-specific professional development (pre-service and in-service) that emphasizes ways of gaining access to students' ways of thinking with texts. Andrew and Caroline's reconsiderations suggest that artifacts of student thinking can be a powerful source for understanding student understanding. In both cases, access to artifacts of student understanding supported these teachers in re-thinking basic assumptions about students as readers of literature. Teacher thinking, such cases suggest, and as mathematics studies have also suggested, can be flexible and responsive given access to close-up data about students.

Still, such flexibility was not a characteristic of the process overall as teachers observed their student readings. Here, this study suggests that we have not fully described the experience of understanding student understanding from teachers' perspectives—especially the larger curricular forces and literacy assumptions that draw teachers' thinking away from students' points of view. As Scholes (1998) argues, content coverage remains "the organizational basis of the field" of English at the university level, an approach that widens "the gap between our pedagogical practices and the needs of our students" (p. 148). Secondary teachers with disciplinary majors are apprenticed to assumptions about specialized content in the academy, where expertise means a teacher's own deep knowledge of a particular area within the wide expanse of the discipline as well as the ability to explicate texts in a scholarly way. Such underlying conceptions of curriculum as coverage or catalogue (Applebee, Burroughs, & Stevens, 2000) ultimately ground and privilege the remembered readings discussed above and disconnect the act of reading

from the process of teaching literature. For Caroline, for instance, deeply informed remembered readings are precisely what she relied on in her teaching, precisely what defined her expertise, and, for her, what the Western literary tradition is about.

From a Gadamerian perspective, we need to help teachers and researchers cultivate an interpretive, self-reflective stance both toward one's disciplinary assumptions and toward the act of understanding itself. As teachers and researchers, we must be willing to position ourselves as partially knowledgeable, or, as Gadamer says, "knowing that one does not know" (p. 363). Teacher educators must model and support habits of revising our notions of reading, our conceptions of curriculum, and our beliefs about how students interact with texts. Teachers need to learn to locate access points into student thinking, as long as we resist the temptation to view access points as direct windows onto student thinking. And we can pursue questions that are raised by the cases of Andrew, Caroline, and Ellen: What makes for a useful artifact of student literary understanding? What specific artifacts might problematize artificial distinctions between reading and literature? How are teachers' conceptions of student thinking shaped by particular social contexts? How might opportunities to converse with colleagues about students' responses to literature potentially transform teachers' conceptions of curriculum?

Jackson (1968), in his classic ethnography of classroom life, suggests that teachers ultimately may be uninterested in a focus on student understanding. The complexity of classrooms, the thousands of decisions, the numbers of students, the compressed time, these factors focus teacher energy more centrally on issues of managing the environment and keeping activities going rather than on scaffolding learning. The point is a stark rejoinder to those "human engineers," as Jackson calls them, who would hope to alter conditions for learning in the classroom quickly on the basis of clinical trials at the university. Yet, Andrew, Caroline, and Ellen's responses suggest that secondary teachers may be especially ripe for frameworks and activities that make student thinking in the disciplines more accessible. The teachers' detailed responses in this study reflect a healthy, if latent, concern for how students learn, and an awareness that such knowledge about students is critical for instruction. This engagement suggests that, as English teacher educators, we can do more to tap the rich curiosity teachers have regarding their students as learners. Such curiosity may reside quite near the surface.

Literature teachers' uncertainty about students' ways of knowing is intimately connected to prevailing conceptions of reading as it relates to literary understanding. It is also rooted in memory-based readings of literature that work against a competency-based, student-centered perspective of student understanding. We must make explicit teacher conceptions of reading and the experienced ways of reading English teachers bring to their classrooms, planning, and assessment. We are only just beginning to appreciate what it might mean for teachers to learn, not so much about students' ways of knowing, but about the productive space between teacher, researcher, and student perspectives.

ENDNOTES

1. Think-aloud methodology has provided researchers with access to readers' thinking in ways typically not illuminated by studies using adjunct questions or post-reading responses (Kucan & Beck, 1997). Still, think-aloud methods often suffer from the naïve assumption that what individuals spontaneously say during reading is a transparent window onto their real thinking. While think-alouds do provide a new lens with which to view reader processing, critics point out that researcher prompts and instructions can easily bias reader response. More broadly, verbal reading protocols have been challenged for their insensitivity to situational contexts, especially the social and cultural factors affecting the way individuals respond to texts (see Pressley & Afflerbach, 1995). For example, thinking aloud with a university researcher is quite different from sharing such thinking with friends, or alone, or with colleagues in a mandated district workshop.
2. Given space limitations, I focus on two teachers only in each section below, but the general findings apply to all three teachers in the study (cf. Hamel 2000).
3. It is worth pointing out that reading against memory can reflect a variety of theoretical stances with literature. Caroline's experience with New Criticism is reflected in this reading. A different re-reading of the passage might involve other assumptions, e.g., attention to gendered language or to psychoanalytic (parent-child) relationships.

AUTHOR NOTE

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APPENDIX A: TRANSCRIPT SUMMARY EXAMPLE

Andrew's Interview #2

pp. 1-2
I describe think-aloud process. AB shows interest in the "reading-thinking connections" that are revealed by the process.

Note
AB later reported to me that he talked with Ellen and Caroline about the purposes of the study. AB had told them that I was in fact "teaching them." The think-aloud, just in the nature of the activity, focused his attention on his own reading processes in more detail than he had done in the past. Why does he use the term "reading/thinking connections"? One thing I admire in Andrew already is his openness/eagerness to learn something about his work.

pp. 3-5
AB rehearses think-aloud with "Runner." He is precise, stopping at every word or allusion for which he has a question. He wonders about unusual language, admires certain images ("oh, that's a nice idea—"), and works to make general sense of the picture, successfully ("Okay, she's a reporter.") AB talks about picturing the scene.

pp. 5-9
Goes through the opening section of "Long Black Song" from Richard Wright's collection, *Uncle Tom's Children.* Notes his familiarity with the story. Stops on almost every line—with a question ("Why would she think of water?"), observation ("That's odd, maybe there's something wrong with the child."), and/or personal connection (Going back, of course, I've had kids . . ."). He also notes possible literary techniques, such as foreshadowing. On p.8 he critiques the speaker's explanation for the baby's fussiness re "teething." On p. 9 he makes larger connections and sees the opening sequence as revealing the child as a problem "in a larger way." The child is "controlling her life in a way she doesn't want it to."

pp. 10-13
AB provides skilled reading of Heaney's "Personal Helicon." Makes several personal associations with wells. Expresses confusion over title. Comments on interesting images ("Can you plummet up?"). Puzzles over some phrases. Disagrees with the speaker. And makes metaphorical leap to connect wells to poems. Reveals that he writes poems. Has thoughtful approach to what poems are for (p. 12).

pp. 14-15
Comments on own reading processes. Identifies that he makes personal connections, that he stops and pauses over "savory" passages, and that he tries to "connect the ideas that are going on."

pp. 16-18
Talks about how his students would respond to "Personal Helicon." First he asks what the context would be. ("Are they reading this on their own, or are we reading and discussing it?" p.16). He finds this a "good question." AB says students wouldn't know what a "windlass" is.

Notes students might not have background to make personal connections. Might not know terminology ("brickyard"). Students might not know about "foxglove" or the word "scaresome" (16). Notes that students would not likely make same metaphorical leap he made at the end. AB identifies the third stanza as a difficult one (18). Students might get confused. And "oftentimes it seems once they trip they . . . stay down."

pp. 18-23

What strategies would students bring to this poem? AB believes they would bring personal experience to the poem. "We all do as readers," he says. "I may do it just a little more consciously" (19). Discusses how for students reading a poem "works in a different way." Many treat the poem as assignment—to just get finished. Many would struggle. Many might not even read it. AB discusses what he might do with the poem—provide anecdote about wells. May give students questions. But AB shies away from giving tests on poems. Poetry is "too special" for such "crass" treatment. (20). He isn't sure he'd do anything special with this poem. Has difficulty thinking this through, since it's so out of context. He mentions having students write long paragraphs or 1/2 page analyses on what they get from the piece.

Andrew and I discuss upcoming interviews. [Not transcribed]

Notes

I'm struck by the sophistication of AB's reading of the literature, but the relative narrowness in his pedagogical thinking about literature. In other words, he has difficulty translating his own practice with texts in terms of how to help students understand texts. Part of this may be influenced by his unclear sense of where students actually are, of how students actually read. Other than that they don't like it and see it as an "assignment."